

A Survey and Research on Language Usage in Border Counties of Ethnic Minorities in China Taking Burang County, Tibet as an Example

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ABSTRACT

China's ethnic minority border counties are geographically adjacent to other countries and have frequent foreign exchanges. The local border trade and tourism development provide them with advantages in foreign language environment. It has certain practical significance to discuss the language use in border counties. This paper takes Burang County, Ngari Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region as a case investigation point, and uses a questionnaire survey to investigate the language use of students in compulsory education in different scenarios, so as to study the language use in border counties of ethnic minorities in China. According to the survey, local students' home language, social language, and media language are mainly Tibetan and Chinese Mandarin, while the frequency of English is far less high. However, affected by the special geographical location of the local area, many students still showed interest in English and the languages of surrounding countries, mainly reflected in the two aspects of social language and media language. Facts have proved that foreign languages are practical for local students. Because the development of tourism and border trade requires foreign language exchanges, learning and using foreign languages has practical significance to promote local economic development, and also contributes to cultural exchanges with neighboring countries and ethnic groups.

Keywords: Language usage, Border counties, Ethnic minorities, Questionnaire survey.

1. INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW OF BURANG COUNTY¹

Burang (ལྷོ་རྩེ་རྫོང་) is located in Ngari, Tibet Autonomous Region, China. The south of Burang County is adjacent to Nepal and India. It is one of the 12 border counties in China where the three countries meet. The border line is more than 300 kilometers long, of which the Sino-Nepal border line is more than 200 kilometers long and the Sino-Indian border line is more than 100 kilometers long[1].

1. The author completed the field investigation part of the sub-project "National Language Survey-Burang Dialect in Burang, Tibet" of "Chinese Language Resources Protection Project" in Burang County from July to August 2019. During this period, relevant investigations were also carried out for this study. Some of the materials in this chapter were provided by Mrs. Caidan Zhuoga from the Nine-Year System School. The author would like to express the thanks. At the same time, special thanks would be sent to the students of the school for their active participation in this survey.

As a border county, Burang has been an important town for economic, cultural and religious exchanges between Ngari and Nepal and India from ancient times to the present. Overseas pilgrims and traders mostly enter through this port². According to records, the non-governmental border trade in Burang County has a history of 500 years. There is Tangga Market in the territory, which is mainly a business place for Indian merchants, Nepalese merchants and a very small number of local Tibetans. Although this international trade market is very simple, it also adds an international color to Burang County, and the local economy also relies on border trade to develop to a certain extent.

The local residents of Burang County are mainly Tibetan, and there are 5 ethnic groups including Han, Uyghur, Kazakh and Hui. The local mainly uses the Tibetan language U-tsang dialect

2. Yadong County and Zhangmu County are also important entry-exit ports in Tibet Autonomous Region.

Burang, and the territory is divided into rural dialects and pastoral dialects. The pastoral dialects are similar to the dialects of the neighboring Gar County, Geji County and Shigatse County in the neighboring Ngari area; the rural dialects are deeply influenced by the Nepalese and Indian frontiers. (See "Burang County Chronicle", 2011:455) After the liberation of Burang, under the influence of the relevant policies of the national common language, Burang borrowed a lot of Chinese vocabulary; at the same time, relying on its geographical advantage, it frequently communicated with people from neighboring countries through border trade activities and tourism activities. The words of Burang have also absorbed a lot of English vocabulary and Nepali vocabulary. Currently, in basic education in Burang County, all Tibetan language courses are taught in U-tsang dialect (the official Lhasa dialect).[2] Although Burang is a U-tsang dialect, it is mainly different from the U-tsang dialect in terms of vocabulary and pronunciation, so Burang cannot be completely equated with Lhasa dialect.

2. THE BASICS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In order to understand the language usage of students during compulsory education in Burang County, the researchers conducted a questionnaire survey among local students. The nine-year consistent system schools in the county were selected as sample schools, and the language usage of students of different grades in the researchers' school were randomly checked in the form of online questionnaires. Four language scenarios were set, and there were a total of 13 questions.[3]

A total of 271 valid questionnaires were collected in this survey. Except for 1 Hui student, the remaining 270 were Tibetan students; 244 students were born in Burang County, and 27 were out-of-town students (including 1 student from Gansu and 26 from Tibet, including 3 from Lhasa City, 3 from Shigatse City, 3 from Shannan City, 4 from Chamdo City, and 13 from Ngari Prefecture — 9 from Shiquanhe Town, 2 from Gar County, 1 in Zanda County and 1 in Ritu County); 128 were male students and 143 were female students. The average age was 14 years old, the oldest was 23 years old, and the youngest was 6 years old. The grade distribution is shown in the following "Figure 1":

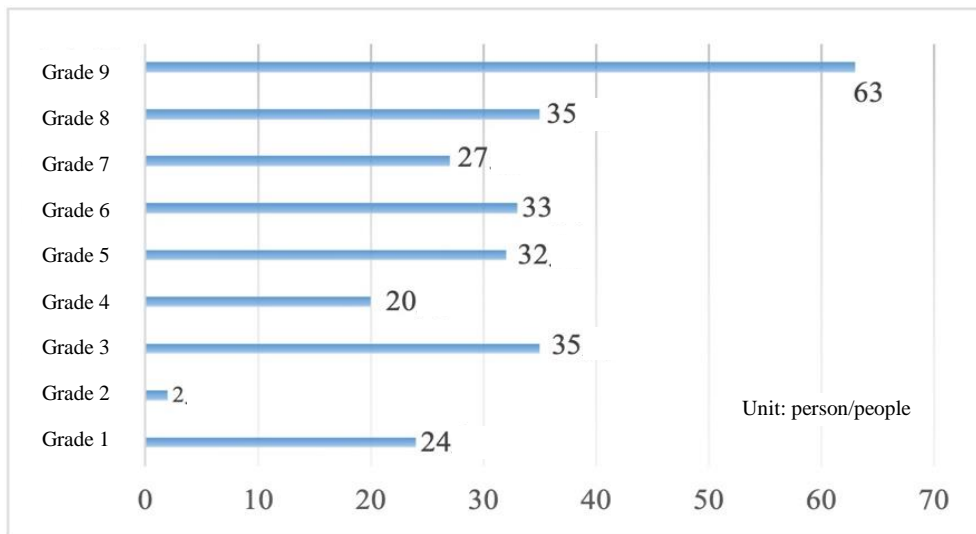


Figure 1 Distribution of grades of respondents.

3. LANGUAGE USAGE AMONG COMPULSORY EDUCATION STUDENTS IN BURANG COUNTY

situation of students' campus language at this stage is as follows ("Table 1"):

3.1 Language Usage Condition in Campus

The first scene of the survey is a school. The results of the questionnaire show that the basic

Table 1. Language usage on campus

Indicator 1	Indicator 2	Indicator 3	Lhasa dialect	Chinese Mandarin	Burang dialect
Classroom	Communicating with teachers	Chinese class	57.56%	69.74%	41.70%
		Tibetan language class	86.35%	28.04%	46.13%
		English class	52.24%	72.24%	43.67%
		Other classes	79.34%	61.62%	48.34%
After class	Communicating with teachers		80.07%	56.09%	56.09%
	Communicating with classmates		77.12%	56.83%	59.04%

The use of language in the campus scene is first divided into two indicators: the language used in class and the language used after class[4]. In addition to the teacher's teaching language discussed earlier, the language used in class also includes the language used by students to communicate with teachers or answer questions and speak in class. Judging from the results of the returned questionnaires, the number of people who speak and answer questions in Chinese Mandarin is the first, with a total of 189 people, accounting for 69.74%; the second is Lhasa, with a total of 156 people, accounting for 57.56%; In addition, 102 people spoke in the Tibetan-Chinese bilingual Mandarin class, accounting for 37.64%, and 52 of them would mix Burang dialect, that is, the local dialect. Looking at the situation of the Tibetan language class, up to 86% of the students (234 people) communicated with the Tibetan language teacher in Lhasa, and 125 students communicated in the local dialect Burang, accounting for 46.13%. In contrast, only 76 students spoke in Chinese Mandarin, accounting for 28.04%. In addition, 64 people (23.63%) were bilingual in Tibetan and Chinese. In English classes, students used Chinese to answer questions more often, and 98 of them (40%) could communicate with English teachers in both Tibetan and Chinese. In addition, in other classes, students used Lhasa dialect to speak more. A total of 215 students (79.34%) chose this option. Among them, 142 students (52.4%) communicated with other teachers in Tibetan and Chinese. This shows that students are better at speaking in Lhasa in other classes. The analysis results of this part are actually basically consistent with the analysis

results of the teaching terms expected by the students in the previous part.

Then the students' language usage after class is analysed as the following content. On the one hand, when communicating with teachers, students often use Lhasa dialect, a total of 215 students, accounting for 80%. And numbers of students using Chinese Mandarin and Burang are the same, both 152 students, accounting for about 56%. After class, 131 students (48.34%) used Tibetan and Chinese to communicate with teachers. On the other hand, students also use Lhasa dialect the most when communicating with each other after class, but the total proportion is lower than that when communicating with teachers; It is basically the same as the use of Chinese Mandarin when communicating with teachers; Burang was used more frequently among the students, and 127 people (46.86%) used both Tibetan and Chinese to communicate. Generally speaking, Lhasa dialect is the main language used by students in the school after class. Among them, more students use more formal Lhasa dialect when communicating with teachers, while the language used by classmates is relatively casual.

3.2 Language Usage Condition in Families

Family is also an important part of a student's language usage situation. There are three groups of objects in this questionnaire, which are family members of different generations for students. Such a survey can reflect the extent to which students' language use is affected by different types of family members.

Table 2. Language usage in families

	Lhasa dialect	Chinese Mandarin	Burang dialect	Others
Communicating with grandparents	77.12%	22.51%	59.04%	1.85%
Communicating with parents	76.38%	27.68%	63.47%	1.85%
Communicating with siblings	73.06%	54.24%	61.25%	1.85%

According to "Table 2", the following characteristics can be summarized: The primary and secondary school students in Burang County mainly spoke Tibetan in their families, including Lhasa and local Tibetan dialects, especially when communicating with grandparents and parents (elders). The Lhasa dialect was used by 206 people (77.12%) and 207 people (76.38%) respectively, and the difference was very small. Followed by Burang, with 160 people (59.04%) and 172 people (63.47%), while the proportion of Chinese Mandarin is about 20%, which is much lower than the other two languages. There were not many students who use both Tibetan and Chinese for communication. Among them, 51 students (18.82%) communicated with their parents in both Tibetan and Chinese, and 62 students (22.88%) communicated with their grandparents in both Tibetan and Chinese. In comparison (see "Figure 2"), the proportion of students who communicate with their grandparents in Lhasa is slightly higher than that with their parents, and correspondingly, the proportion of students who communicate with their parents in Chinese Mandarin is 5 percentage

points higher. When students communicate with siblings of the same generation, the proportion of using Tibetan is relatively low, but the proportion of using Chinese Mandarin has increased significantly, which is more than 20 percentage points higher than the proportion of Chinese communication among elders.

The results of the survey comparison and analysis here fully reflect the intergenerational differences in the use of family languages. This difference is mainly reflected in the use of the local ethnic language and Chinese Mandarin. Specifically, the elderly are more likely to use Tibetan and Burang dialect than the young. The proportion of young people using Chinese Mandarin has increased significantly, and their degree of bilingualism is higher. This shows that in recent years, the promotion of Chinese Mandarin among the younger generation in China's ethnic minority areas, the development of Tibetan and Chinese language education, especially the objective effect of Chinese language education, is very significant,[5] and the population of the ethnic language is showing an aging trend.

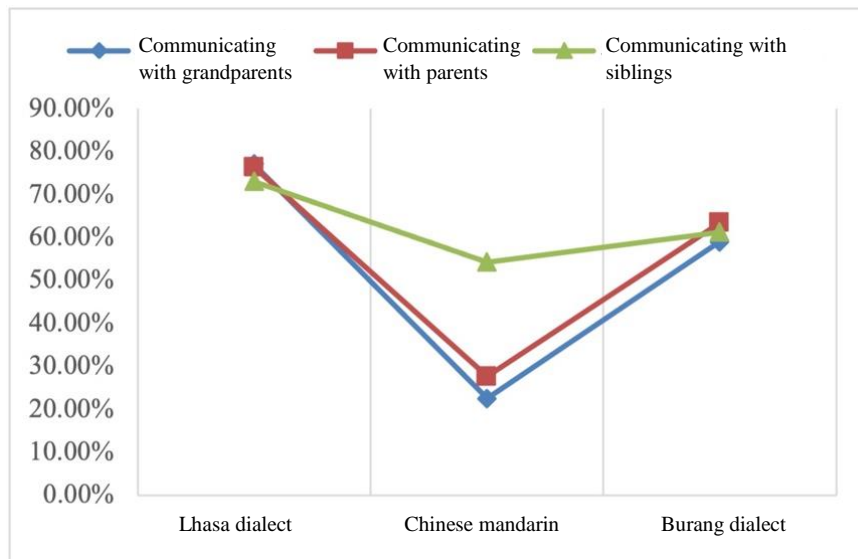


Figure 2 Comparison of family language usage.

3.3 Language Usage Condition in Local Society

The language usage condition in the local society of the school students outside the school will be showed in this part, including language use in some public places, such as local hospitals, squares, shops and other non-family, non-campus language environments. According to "Figure 3", it is obvious that local students mainly use Lhasa

(210 people, 77.49%) and Chinese Mandarin (193 people, 71.22%) in these scenarios, followed by Burang (140 people, 51.66%), while more than half, 157, or 57.93% of the students communicated in Tibetan and Chinese, and half of them (79, 29.15%) could speak Lhasa, Chinese and Burang. In addition, there are 7 students who chose the "Other" option in this survey question, and one of them said that they can use the Chinese dialect Sichuan dialect. During the field investigation, the author found that

there are indeed many Sichuanese running restaurants and shops in the local area, and so on, so this situation is also in line with reality; in addition, there are 6 students who can speak

English, which can also reflect the language use characteristics of the border counties of Burang County to a certain extent.

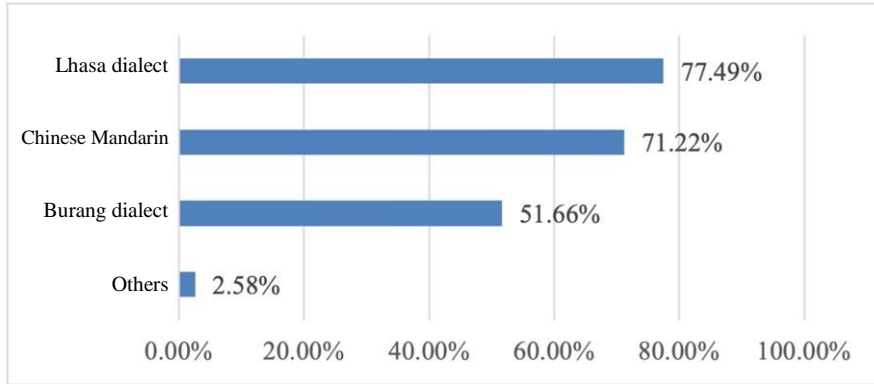


Figure 3 Language usage in public places outside of school.

3.4 Language Usage Condition in Media, Books and Songs

Finally, the author would like to introduce the language usage condition of media, books and songs by local primary and secondary school students. ("Table 3") Judging from the results of the questionnaire, primary and secondary school students in Burang County mainly watch TV programs in Chinese and Tibetan. Among them, Chinese programs account for the highest proportion, accounting for 88%, which is nearly 15 percentage points higher than Tibetan programs. According to statistics, a total of 169 students (63.36%) chose both Tibetan and Chinese, including 55 students (20.3%) who chose Tibetan, Chinese and English; and a total of 64 students (23.62%) who chose English programs); students who selected "Others" supplemented programs in Indian (1 person), Korean (2 persons), French (2 persons) and Japanese (1 person). Among the extracurricular books that students read, both

Tibetan and Chinese are popular, accounting for 81.18% and 82.29% of the total number of students respectively. Among them, 174 students (64.21%) chose both Tibetan and Chinese, including the situation of choosing three languages at the same time (43 students, 15.87%); there are 49 students who would like to choose to read in English, accounting for 18%; and 3 students who choose "Others", who can read French, Japanese and English extracurricular books respectively. In terms of songs that are usually sung and listened to, Tibetan and Chinese are still the main ones, accounting for more than 80%, while 93 students listen to English songs, more than 1/3 of the total number of students; there are 183 students (67.53%) who listened to both Tibetan and Chinese songs, of which 75 (27.68%) could listen to songs in Tibetan, English and Chinese; there are also 6 students who added songs in other languages that they usually listen to, including Indian (4 people), Korean (1 person), and French (2 people).

Table 3. Language usage condition in media, books and songs

	Tibetan	Chinese	English	Others
TV programs	73.43%	88.19%	23.62%	1.85%
Extracurricular books	81.18%	82.29%	18.08%	1.11%
Songs	82.29%	83.39%	34.32%	2.21%

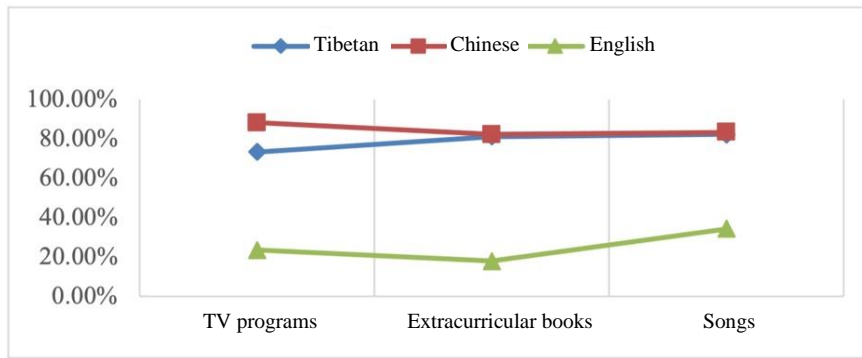


Figure 4 Comparison of language usage condition in media, books and songs.

"Figure 4" shows the comparative statistics of language usage among the three media. It can be clearly seen that when students use the three media to obtain information, they mainly use Tibetan and Chinese, and most students choose both Tibetan and Chinese; in contrast, English TV programs, extracurricular books, and songs are far from the popularity of the other two languages, which also reflects the basic situation of local students receiving language education, that is, Tibetan and Chinese are mainly bilingual, and the students' current overall English level and English reading ability are relatively low.[6], [7] In addition, influenced by some cultural industries with strong communication power between Japan and South Korea, some students will watch Korean and Japanese TV dramas and listen to some songs, and the introduction of Indian songs is also closely related to the nature of the local border counties.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper takes Burang County's nine-year consistent system school as a sample school, and uses a questionnaire to investigate the language usage of local primary and secondary school students in different scenarios of campus, family, and society, as well as the language they choose when watching TV, reading, and listening to songs. In general, local students mainly use Tibetan and Chinese Mandarin on different occasions, and the degree of bilingualism is relatively high. This shows that in recent years, the local development of language education, especially the national common language education, has achieved remarkable results.[8], [9], [10] The use of English is far less frequent, but due to the special geographical location, many students still show interest in English and the languages of surrounding countries, which are mainly reflected in social terms and media terms.

In general minority areas, English does not have a broad application environment, and minority students lack occasions to use English. However, in border counties like Burang County, the development of border trade and tourism requires that foreign languages should be popularized earlier. Burang is an important town for economic, cultural and religious exchanges between Ngari and Nepal and India from ancient times to the present. When local people participate in border trade, they often have to communicate directly with foreigners. Learning and using foreign languages has practical significance in promoting economic development, and can also better serve the tourism industry. Therefore, it is more practical for local students to learn foreign languages.[11] In addition, foreign language learning and use also contributes to cultural exchanges between ethnic groups and countries.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Xin Lin.

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